

# The Decline (But Not Fall) of Analog Cellular

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**A**nalog cellular service has, almost overnight, become the telecom equivalent of the black-and-white TV set the store keeps on a shelf in the back. It's there, it's cheap to pick up and it still works—but hardly anybody buys one these days and the store long ago stopped bothering to advertise it.

Digital wireless service debuted in 1992 and arrived in the Washington area in November 1995, when Sprint Spectrum launched its all-digital service. It didn't take long for the advantages of digital over analog to surface: better call clarity, longer battery life, more included services (such as voicemail and paging) and lower cost. Meanwhile, digital systems let wireless providers get more capacity out of their existing spectrum licenses and transmitter towers.

By 1998, digital phones were outselling analog

models. Today, both Verizon Wireless (the former Bell Atlantic Mobile) and Cellular One, the two original analog providers in this area, report that about half of their customers have gone digital. New customers are opting for digital service by a wildly lopsided margin.

"In this Washington/Baltimore region, greater than 90 percent of our new . . . customers are digital," a Verizon spokeswoman e-mailed.

Cellular One, for its part, no longer even offers analog service in its own stores or at its Web site, although customers can still buy it from affiliated dealers.

Should you bother? Analog service isn't going to go away—all of the local wireless providers, save Nextel, rely on it as a backstop to their digital networks.

In our tests, both companies' analog services proved to be reasonably reliable, but not bulletproof. The Cell One phone rarely dropped a call—not even during rush hour on busy Braddock Road in Fairfax

County. Voice quality was surprisingly good on the receiving end. But it had trouble picking up incoming calls, which sometimes disappeared into a hail of static.

Meanwhile, Verizon analog service was perfectly crisp and reliable at off-peak hours—late morning, mid-afternoon or after dinner time. Weekday drive-time calls, however, suffered from weak volume, bursts of static and general scratchiness, occasionally in combination with dropped calls and circuits-are-busy messages.

But if analog service can compete with digital service on in-town performance, it crumples when it comes to price. Both Cell One and Verizon's analog price plans are almost always undercut by digital alternatives that cost less and include more airtime. The two exceptions: Cell One's \$17.99 "Economy" plan (\$2 less than its cheapest digital plan) includes 15 minutes a month, and Bell Atlantic's \$14.99 "Talk-Along" (\$5 less than its low-end digital plan) includes

no airtime and instead bills all use at 35 cents a minute.

Although you can save some extra money by getting a free phone (a frequent offer in the analog business), you'll have to pay extra for things that are included with digital services, such as voicemail and even call waiting. Analog services also continue the quaint custom of charging a dime or so for each call to a landline phone.

Both Cell One's and Verizon's minimum-use analog services can work for you—but only if you are positive you will use the phone solely in emergencies and won't give the number to anybody beyond immediate family members. If, however, you have plans beyond that—or if you've been using the same old analog phone for several years, simply renewing the contract—you should think about switching to digital.

*Hope Katz Gibbs and Bob Massey contributed to this report.*